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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 TEGUCIGALPA 000626

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA DAS FISK, WHA/CEN, AND WHA/EPSC  
STATE FOR PM, INL, EB, AND CA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/21/2013

TAGS: [PREL](#) [OVIP](#) [PGOV](#) [SNAR](#) [ETRD](#) [ECON](#) [MOPS](#) [KJUS](#) [HO](#)

SUBJECT: TRANSFORMING CENTRAL AMERICA,S SECURITY PARADIGM:  
NEW MISSIONS, MORE APPROPRIATE WEAPONS, BUT LINGERING  
DOUBTS

Classified By: Ambassador Larry Palmer, Reasons 1.5(b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: President Maduro reiterated his personal commitment to regional disarmament and expressed his willingness to move forward on this issue. He also asked for U.S. support, mentioning directly the possible need for a multilateral security guarantee and asked whether the U.S. could provide transition assistance for demobilized soldiers. Western Hemisphere Affairs (WHA) Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) Dan Fisk informed Maduro that the U.S. does not see threats to any Central American country coming from their regional neighbors. Fisk commented that he had delivered similar messages in San Salvador and Managua over the last month and said that the U.S. wanted to understand how Honduras was restructuring to meet the new threats to national and international security. He encouraged Maduro to take bold steps to rationalize the region's military forces. Fisk stressed that better regional security relationships would help Central American countries realize the full benefits of a Central American integration, including a Central American Free Trade agreement with the United States.  
END SUMMARY

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U.S. Interest In Regional Security  
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12. (C) During WHA DAS Dan Fisk's February 5-8 visit he discussed Central American disarmament efforts, regional military arrangements, and ongoing border disputes with President Ricardo Maduro, Minister of Defense Frederico "Fred" Breve, and Foreign Minister Guillermo Perez-Cadalso Arias. DAS Fisk conveyed the U.S. view that Honduras had nothing to fear from its two neighbors, El Salvador and Nicaragua. He added further that the U.S. does not see threats to any Central American country coming from their regional neighbors, commenting that he had delivered similar messages in San Salvador and Managua over the last month. He said the U.S. welcomed the Honduran perspective on regional security issues and was interested in understanding how Honduras is restructuring its military to meet the new threats to national and international security. He encouraged President Maduro to take bold steps to rationalize Honduras' military and to pursue similar initiatives regarding a new regional security framework. He underscored to the Hondurans that better regional security relationships would help the region realize the full benefits of Central American integration, including a U.S.-Central America Free Trade agreement.

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Maduro Still Willing To Pursue Disarmament  
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13. (C) President Maduro reiterated his personal commitment to regional disarmament during his February 7 meeting with WHA DAS Fisk. He told Fisk that he wants to reduce the amount of money spent on weapons in Honduras. Maduro emphasized that he is willing to move forward on this issue and that his government has a proposal to do so. (COMMENT: We are not aware of, and doubt there is, any concrete proposal prepared by the Government of Honduras (GOH) at this time. END COMMENT.) Noting that the militaries in El Salvador and Honduras were more subordinate to civilian authority than were those in Guatemala and Nicaragua, he commented that his fellow Central American presidents have favorably received his suggestions on this topic. However, Maduro asked for U.S. support, mentioning directly the possible need for a multilateral security guarantee and whether the U.S. could provide economic assistance for demobilized soldiers to be integrated into local economies.

14. (S) DAS Fisk said Washington recognized President Maduro's leadership and reiterated the U.S. assessment that most of the weapons in Central American military inventories represented a Cold War security frame of reference and are not the most effective means to address current threats. He urged President Maduro to take advantage of this historic moment and the good will of his fellow presidents to rearrange Central American security arrangements in a manner that addressed the current threats. Fisk also urged Maduro

to consider a dramatic gesture to seize the moral authority to lead this process. He then suggested that Honduras' F-5 aircraft did not enhance Honduras' ability to confront these new emerging security threats and that the costs of the logistical support for them crowded out other more pressing Honduran military needs. Fisk continued by saying that the Bush Administration was willing to engage on this issue, including noting, for example, that the idea had been raised of U.S. engagement through such regional mechanisms as the Central American Armed Forces Conference (CFAC). He also offered his view that whichever Central American country took the first concrete steps towards transforming its security/military framework would be in a strong position to define the process for the region and would bring positive attention to its actions from Washington.

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MOD Outlines New Regional Military Missions  
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15. (C) In DAS Fisk's first meeting in Honduras on February 6, Defense Minister Fred Breve said that his country's and the region's military are preparing themselves for the new transnational threats to their sovereignty and that his President, Ricardo Maduro, is ready to pursue regional disarmament in order to better align the types of weapons and size of the region's militaries to these new threats. As an example, Breve pointed to the Central American Armed Forces Conference (CFAC) declaration in December that calls on the Central American militaries to prepare a common plan to combat terrorism. In addition to this recognition of new threats, Breve said that CFAC is also working to downgrade their concern about the old threats (i.e. invasion by one country in the region against the other). He said CFAC knows it must now unify in order to act against the new common enemy. As an important first step, the CFAC agreed to new intelligence sharing on organized crime, with specific cooperation in the areas of drug trafficking, narcoterrorism, and Arab alien smuggling. Breve also added that the countries agreed to work toward establishing a "true" regional inter-agency military taskforce. (COMMENT: He did not elaborate on what its mission would be. END COMMENT.) He admitted it will take the countries time to identify first the units for the force and then the resources to support it.

16. (C) Breve specifically stated that, given his reduced military budget, regionalization of Central American military efforts presented an opportunity for more effective use of the limited resources available. He assured Fisk that the Honduran Armed Forces (HOAF) were aware that it was a different world. Breve wants the HOAF to participate in the CFAC counterterrorism unit. He added that the HOAF mindset was changing, noting that he was reorienting Honduran forces to the new missions by reducing the number of bases and battalions and deploying forces in the prime drug trafficking areas of the North Coast. The Maduro administration also has involved the HOAF in the effort to combat the growing crime problem in Honduras and the military itself was more involved with the community via civic action, responding to natural disasters, and helping to address health programs. He assured Fisk that Honduras was adapting to the new threat environment.

17. (C) Fisk responded that the U.S. wanted Honduras to think about new missions in exactly this way. He told Breve that CFAC was the right mechanism to pursue this kind of regionalization of militaries and informed the Minister that the idea of U.S. engagement, through the U.S. Southern Command, with CFAC had recently been raised. Fisk made specific reference to the expanded HOAF engagement in the counternarcotics effort and expressed Washington's appreciation.

18. (C) Breve said he saw military regionalization as directly linked to greater regional economic integration. However, he said Honduras felt there were still some considerable challenges to overcome. He cited the glacial progress toward actual land border demarcation with El Salvador and the continuing Nicaraguan tariff as impediments. He cautioned that Presidential-level commitments to integration were not being translated into action. He also voiced concern about Salvadoran small arms and military transport acquisitions and renewed U.S. interest in military-to-military relations with Nicaragua, which he imagined would eventually include new U.S. military equipment. Noting the smaller size of the Honduras armed forces, he opined that the Honduran Air Force provided equilibrium for the Hondurans, even while he acknowledged at the same time that the Air Force's F-5s were more of a symbolic, rather than an effective, deterrent force.

19. (C) Fisk, noting that he had met two days before with the Salvadoran MOD, said it is the U.S. conclusion that El Salvador's military sees its missions being in such areas as humanitarian/disaster response, and also that it wants to

cooperate with its neighbors. Its defense modernization is designed to help it move troops to respond to these new missions. He said he was impressed with the Salvadoran military's professionalization and added that he did not see any evidence of expansionist tendencies. After reassuring Breve about U.S. views and efforts on the Nicaraguan tariff, Fisk agreed that the U.S. has sought a new relationship with the Nicaraguan military. He told Breve that the U.S. effort was very respectful of Nicaraguan civilian authority over the military and our support would be primarily in logistical areas and designed to help transform the Nicaraguan armed forces to meet their new missions.

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MOD Views Disarmament Favorably But Asks For U.S. Help  
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10. (S) Fisk called Breve's attention to Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Norman Caldera's statement on weapons at the OAS counterterrorism meeting in El Salvador two weeks earlier. He characterized it as very forward learning and stated that the U.S. supported Caldera and the GON efforts to control its weapon inventories, including surface-to-air missiles. Breve felt that Caldera's statement had been made in response to OAS pressure regarding Nicaraguan arms smuggling to terrorists in Colombia. Fisk then stated that there was interest and enthusiasm in the U.S. for disarmament initiatives emanating from the region. He commented that any such effort would have to take into account defense needs to protect against new threats and the resources needed to address them. He told Breve that the U.S. was looking to the region's leaders to grasp this opportunity and that leadership would be needed on these issues. Fisk underscored that the U.S. was open to Central American ideas on this issue and needed the region to let us know where it wanted to go on this issue so that the U.S. could engage. He noted that all sides had weapons that did not meet their needs against the current threats that they confront.

11. (C) Breve outlined talks between President Maduro and Salvadoran President Francisco Flores on disarmament. He said the two had agreed and presented the issue to their fellow Central American presidents. The two presidents were working on how to present such ideas to their militaries. Breve said that initial discussions also had identified broad regional concern about the need to address the implications of the demobilization of forces. The leaders felt that such decommissioned forces would represent a target of opportunity for organized crime. Without some sort of jobs program, organized crime could use its resources to recruit well-trained military to support their ends. Breve affirmed Honduran willingness to start a disarmament process but he believed it would be a long process. As much as he would like to see early agreement, Breve's honest assessment is that it will take some time. He noted that all sides may have the intent but may not be willing to act.

12. (C) Fisk said that he understood the historical challenges confronting the region and that demobilization was a real concern. He said the U.S. did not seek to minimize the challenges but hoped for a start in the short term. He urged that all sides consider bold steps. He stressed that whomever "gambled" first would have the moral high ground and could use it to move the others. He suggested that another way to approach the issue was to view it as a rationalization of arms inventories rather than disarmament of militaries. He highlighted that the U.S. goal was a better framework for overall regional security. Breve thanked Fisk for this encouragement and closed by mentioning the need to consider a multilateral security guarantee or body with oversight authority.

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Foreign Minister Concerned About El Salvador and Nicaragua  
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13. (C) In DAS Fisk's meeting with Foreign Minister Perez-Cadalso later in the day, the FM reiterated Honduran concerns and suspicions about its neighbors' intentions. (COMMENT: Interestingly, MOD Breve made a similar comment, saying that suspicions would continue to exist in the short-term. END COMMENT.) Two issues stood out: Honduran concern about Nicaragua's 35 per cent tariff and deep frustration over the slow, practically non-existent pace of land border demarcation with El Salvador. Perez-Cadalso stated that both problems were frustrating to the GOH because Presidential-level agreements were not being followed through on at the working level by its neighbors. However, in both cases, Perez-Cadalso affirmed that these were issues that needed to be put behind the countries because the leaders shared the same vision of the future.

14. (C) FM Perez-Cadalso stressed that the GOH was prepared to accept an ICJ ruling on its maritime border with Nicaragua, but that the tariff threatened to start a trade war between the two countries. He noted that the Maduro

government had been patiently waiting for some action for more than a year. He warned that the Honduran Congress was considering taking action because many in Tegucigalpa were skeptical that the Nicaraguan Congress really planned to act.

15. (C) Perez-Cadalso was equally frustrated about the land border demarcation with El Salvador. He said that it was now more than 10 years since the ICJ ruling and there had been very little progress in actually marking the border as called for in the ruling. He commented that many Hondurans believe that El Salvador is simply stalling. He told DAS Fisk that Honduras was prepared to accept a technical expert (an independent third party, preferably an American engineer) who could settle disputes on the spot. Perez-Cadalso said that the GOH was prepared to accept such an arrangement in order to make progress.

Palmer